

*The Strange Case of Dr. Beddoes*

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But it was not all work and no play; for instance, there were fireworks. 'Last night I astonished this part of England with sending up an air-balloon; filled partly with light, partly with heavy inflammable air. I was desirous to try whether such a mass of inflammable air, burning at a considerable height in the atmosphere, would produce any imitation of fiery meteors.' The experiment was perfect; the balloon burnt ravishingly, a mile high. Since, however, Dr. Beddoes goes on to add 1 have never beheld an igneous meteor, and as descriptions of such objects are very ill calculated to convey accurate ideas, I cannot pretend to ascertain the resemblance or difference', he does not seem to have ended much wiser than he began. But it remains a very characteristic experiment. All his life he was to pursue the remarkable; all his life his ruling passion was to be for gases and 'Factitious Airs'. He ran after a hundred other things, but to them he returned, as if his little round person had been itself a sort of balloon. With them he tried to bleach negroes. For their sake he escorted cows into bedrooms, while the enraged lodging-house keepers of Clifton called Heaven to witness that they had not let their stairs for hoofed traffic. In their name he wrote works and founded 'Pneumatic Institutions'. And when the end came, he seems to have died feeling sadly that they had been after

all only an *ignis fatuus*.

Meanwhile, however, he pursued also, it must be admitted, a multitude of lesser loves. He produced papers on Basalts, on the conversion of cast into malleable iron, on the abuses of the Bodleian Library, and on the Curl in Potatoes; he planned a set of Botanical Dialogues; he penned *Observations on the Nature of Demonstrative Evidence, with Reflections on Language* and *A Letter to a Lady on the Instruction of the Poor*. Nor was his mind limited